Mid-Block Feedback in Problem-Based Learning

The *Good*, the *Bad*, and the *Ugly*
Our medical students are diverse

- Ethnicities
- Personalities
- Competencies
- Goals
- Self-perceptions
Each PBL group is comprised of students with a mix of backgrounds and skills

- Tutor’s goal is to optimize interactions of the group to maximize learning
  - Students must learn to work responsibly and cooperatively as a team
  - Students must develop skills in acquiring, synthesizing, and providing the specific knowledge needed by the team to understand and solve problems
  - Students must learn to communicate effectively

- In order to optimize effectiveness of the group, tutor must help students to improve each of these skills
Feedback, both internal and external, is required for improvement of skills.

• This is a basic tenant of cognitive and behavioral psychology

• LCME mandates that “medical schools must provide students with formative evaluation” (i.e. feedback on performance) for accreditation.*

* Functions and Structures of a Medical School: Standards for Accreditation of Medical Education Programs Leading to the M.D. Degree, 2003
The Good
Students want feedback in PBL

• Evaluation of tutor is NOT correlated with the grade received.

• Evaluation of tutor is NOT correlated with whether the student thought the grade was too harsh, too lenient, or accurate.

• Evaluation of tutor IS correlated with student perceptions of quality of feedback/discussion provided by tutor.

Dolmans et al, Med Ed, 2006 40:180-86
The Bad
Averages of PBL Group Tutor Evaluations by Question

1. Questioned & probed reasoning process.
2. Balanced participation of students.
3. Encouraged critical appraisal of information during Friday’s session.
4. Did not dominate the group.
5. Facilitated good interpersonal relationships.
6. Promoted syntheses of multiple disciplinary perspectives on Friday.
7. Provided useful feedback to students, individually and as group on Friday’s.
The Xjo
Although feedback has been shown to be necessary for performance improvement, and students want feedback . . .

. . . tutors appear loathe to provide feedback other than praise to students in their groups.
Tutors view giving anything but the most positive feedback as disruptive to the relationships they have formed with group members. They see feedback in terms of judgment and evaluation, which is authoritarian in nature—a parent-child type of exchange. Negative feedback is seen as demoralizing and leading to strained relationships. Students are already trying hard, so what good will feedback do? Positive feedback will at least get students to like PBL (and tutor?) more.
Unfortunately, positive feedback doesn’t necessarily improve student attitude

- Positive feedback promotes favorable attitudes only when the student has exerted a high degree of effort.

- Positive feedback on assignments in which the student has exerted a low degree of effort does not promote a favorable attitudes.

And although feedback is necessary to improve performance, IT IS NOT SUFFICIENT
Giving feedback improves the recipients performance only when the recipient has a performance goal.

- If the recipient has no desire to change his/her behaviors, the information will be ignored.

- In addition, the tutor should not assume that the information given is new to the recipient.

Redemption
Know the student’s goals

• The student’s goals may be different from those of the tutor or the group
  – A student may not wish to be more sensitive, more thoughtful, more assertive, less domineering, etc.
  – Unless the student can see the value of changing a behavior, feedback towards that end is bound to fail.

Using self-evaluation will enhance the value and impact of feedback

• Addressing feedback to students’ self-identified areas for improvement will increase the probability that the feedback will be incorporated.

• Furthermore, the role of the tutor changes from evaluative and authoritarian to that of a coach.

• The tutor can manipulate the students’ focus towards behaviors related to the goals of the course.
The Mid-Block Feedback Session

• The PBL tutors’ guide for all blocks states that the tutor will meet with each student individually halfway through the block to give the student feedback on his/her performance.

• This mid-block session is the proper place to identify areas needing improvement.

• The student should have the PBL Evaluation Form as a guide to areas in which he/she is expected to develop proficiency in PBL.
Use self-evaluation to identify goals

• Using the evaluation form as a guide, prior to the midterm evaluation, each student answers four questions to be read by and discussed with the tutor:
  
  – What single behavior would I like to improve by the end of the block that will contribute most to enhancing my own learning in PBL?
  
  – How will I go about changing this behavior?
  
  – What single behavior would I like to improve by the end of the block that will most enhance learning by other members of the group?
  
  – How will I go about changing this behavior?
End of Block

• The students have the remaining half block to work on attaining identified behavior changes.

• In the final evaluation, the tutor can address any observable improvement in these behaviors.

• Goals can be communicated to the subsequent block and the students can continue to work on these behaviors and receive feedback directed towards their efforts.
Giving Feedback

Focus feedback on

– behavior rather than the person
– observation rather than inferences
– description rather than judgment
– the sharing of ideas and information rather than on giving advice
– exploration of alternatives rather than answers or solutions
– the value it may have to the recipient, not on the value or "release" that it provides the person giving the feedback
– the amount of information that the person receiving it can use, rather than on the amount that you have which you might like to give

From George Lehner, University Associates Press, 1975
The Land of Life-Long Learning
(where reflection and self-monitoring rule)